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## *Making Teachers Accountable for Students' Disruptive Classroom Behaviour*

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**ABSTRACT** *Using a more conversational analytical approach, this paper examines the various situated ways in which secondary school students, in interaction with teachers, describe and explain their disruptive classroom behaviour. The focus is on how students account for their behaviour and force accountability on teachers. Students gave accounts and made teachers accountable by defining disruptive behaviour in relation to schoolwork and claims about normality, and by drawing on common understandings about teacher identity. In doing so, various discursive devices were used such as extreme case formulations, introducing corroborating witnesses, deploying the notion of consistency, giving detailed descriptions, making category contrasts, and displaying uncertainty and incomprehension. The different accounts all worked in the direction of emphasising the role of the teacher, and the analysis raises questions about power relations in school and the empowerment of students.*

### **Introduction**

Teacher's expertise and authority is reflected in their behaviour. Within the classroom, the teacher has direct power as the constituted authority. However, this position of authority is often not maintained in an authoritarian way. Because of the spreading of egalitarian ideas, today's authorities can no longer be taken for granted. Egalitarian norms suggest that each person is to be respected for his/her opinions and perspectives. Furthermore, educational ideologies about child-centred learning influence teaching styles; students learn very early on to be critical, responsible and autonomous. In the Netherlands, for example, where the present study was conducted, the framework of 'study home' has recently been introduced in secondary education whereby 'learning to learn' is the central objective and teachers are expected to operate like process managers. As a result, more co-operative regimes in the classroom are on the increase, based on negotiation and bargaining. Teachers have to account for the decisions and evaluations they make, and students have considerable influence on the educational process. Classroom rules are negotiated and the teacher's behaviour is restricted.

There are different studies examining the students' part in negotiating learning and classroom rules (for example, Beynon, 1985; Woods, 1990). In these studies, various

strategies have been identified that are used for testing out teachers and their teaching methods (such as 'sussing') and for resisting and restricting work (such as 'going slow', 'working to rule', and forms of truanting). Furthermore, studies have examined how student values and principles affect classroom behaviour and the acceptance of the legitimacy of teacher's authority (see Griffin, 1993). Two classical examples are the study of Werthman (1963) on lower-class 'gang members', and Willis' (1977) study of counter-culture in school as a development of working-class culture. Werthman showed, for example, that reactions to teachers were strongly dependent on notions of fairness related to the outcome of decisions, and in particular to procedures or how authority is exercised.

The present study does not follow a resistance theory approach (McFadden, 1995), but examines accountability in school. The aim of this paper is to examine the various situated ways in which secondary school students, in interaction with teachers, describe and explain their 'disruptive' classroom behaviour. Several studies have examined students' accounts for their disruptive behaviour (for example, Tattum, 1982; Lawrence *et al.*, 1984). In the present study, however, a more ethnomethodological and conversational analytical stance shall be taken in trying to show, in detail, how exactly students manage issues of responsibility and interest. The more explicit and obvious forms of recalcitrance shall not be dealt with, but the finely-tuned discursive processes that students use in making teachers responsible. The focus is on how students account for their behaviour, and in particular how they force accountability on teachers. In general, students are not simply showing disruptive behaviour. Rather, they show subversion in such a way that a legitimate account can be offered if challenged. Disruptive behaviour is typically defined as problematic by teachers and often leads to punishment. For example, students are sent out of class, have to write lines, are told to stay late or to report early the next day and, in the long run, they get a negative reputation. In short, there is a great deal at stake for students. It is in their interest to give an acceptable account in which their claims and versions are presented as factual and rational, and alternatives are undermined.

The literature on accounts is extensive and diverse (see Antaki (1994) for a review). For example, in trying to develop a scheme or taxonomy of exoneration utterances, some authors have made distinctions within the broad notions of excuses and justifications (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Semin & Manstead, 1983). Others argue that issues of detail of actual talk determine whether utterances function as accounts in a particular context (for example, Edwards, 1997). The present paper is more in line with the latter approach. Its focus is on accounts as accomplishments or how students in interaction explain their disruptive behaviour. Not every assessment is equally acceptable or convincing. Specific evaluations and interpretations can be discounted or undermined as opinions that lack rationality and are not supported by reality. An assessment can always be criticised by arguing that it says more about the person doing the assessment than about the behaviour that is being assessed. Thus, an interpretation in terms of disruptive behaviour can be criticised by defining it as a personal or unfounded opinion reflecting the teacher's bias instead of the student's actual behaviour. An assessment can be undermined by questioning its factuality. Such a challenge draws attention to the teacher and the assessment itself as crucial parts of labelling behaviour as disruptive. Presenting an assessment as not grounded in reality makes it dependent on the methods of description and interpretation, and on the role of the teacher. So it can be examined how students challenge an assessments of 'disruptive behaviour' as not being factual and objective.

Furthermore, in their accounts, people not only construct specific versions of their

behaviour, but also of themselves and others. Evaluative judgements have identity implications and therefore involve identity constructions. For example, disruptive behaviour can be attributed to teachers' inability to establish order or to a lack of professionalism. Furthermore, accusations of irrationality and inconsistency have negative consequences for a teacher and would themselves justify the rejection of an interpretation. After all, it is on the grounds of accepting the teacher's reasonableness that a student can be convinced of the accuracy of the assessment. Hence, teachers' assessments of disruptive behaviour can be undermined or challenged by deploying the possible interpretation in terms of irrationality and psychological peculiarities.

In examining the accounts in which students explain their disruptive behaviour, the focus is on discourse. The study of discourse has become an important perspective for educational research (for reviews, see Gee *et al.*, 1992; Hicks, 1995; Luke, 1995). Discourse analysis approaches have been developed for studying a range of phenomena, such as the ways in which opportunities for learning are constructed in classroom and curriculum (for example, Cazden, 1988; Edwards & Mercer, 1987).

There are various analytical approaches for studying these educational issues. There are also different approaches for examining the way constructions are made and the actions they perform (see Antaki, 1994; Edwards, 1997). Among other things, these approaches differ with regard to the amount of contextual information considered necessary for interpretation (Auer & Di Lucio, 1992; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). For example, Gee & Green (1998) argue for an ethnographically grounded approach to discourse analysis in educational research (Mehan, 1991). Such an approach implies that material outside the actual talk should be taken into account in the analysis. In contrast, conversation analytical approaches emphasise that analysts should rely on how the participants themselves orient and react to each other in interaction (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1992). In these approaches, it is argued that solid ground for the analytical claims must be found within the talk and not outside it. The present study considers the way the students justify their behaviour within the context of interactions with teachers. The definitions and reactions of the interactants themselves are used as the main ground for determining meaning. However, the analysis is less concerned with the sequential organisation of talk that is central in conversational analysis. The aim is to show the interactive work that is being done when students are organising and orientating their talk to issues of accountability.

## Analytical Context

The material used in this paper was collected during a participant observation study in a secondary school in Rotterdam. The school is located in the city centre and has more than 1450 students from over 20 different ethnic backgrounds. The school caters for different levels of education, ranging from preparatory vocational training (VBO), through lower and upper general secondary education (MAVO and HAVO), to university preparatory education (VWO). Within the Rotterdam area, the school has a reputation as a difficult one in terms of its student population. This qualification refers to the low social-economic and diverse ethnic backgrounds of the students.

The research was carried out for 8 months from October to May. Because the school year starts at the end of August, the research was not concerned with classroom behaviour in initial encounters. During the course of the research, different classes were visited and contacts were made with many students and teachers. In addition, four third-form 'core' classes were studied extensively. The main part of the research was an

in-depth study of these four classes that differ in level of education (from VBO to HAVO) and in which 76 students were present in total. The students were between 14 and 16 years of age.

The research involved extensive observations within and outside the classroom, and 'spontaneous' conversations with students and teachers. Furthermore, systematic interviews were held with all the pupils of the four core classes and with teachers. Some of these interviews were with one student only, whereas other interviews were with two or three students at the same time.

All the interviews and many conversations and discussions were taped and transcribed. In view of the amount of text, the transcript is considerably less detailed than is common in conversational analysis. Details such as pause lengths were not included but emphasises are indicated by italics. In general, the transcript foregrounds the semantic content and the broad structural characteristics of the talk. Extracts of the transcripts will be used to make more general theoretical points about accounts students offer. It is not always easy to translate discussions adequately. Nuances are easily lost in translating everyday talk and some words may have typical meanings in a language. Here, a more literal translation was used and, where necessary, the original Dutch terms are given.

## **Defining Disruptive Behaviour**

The first thing I want to draw attention to is the fact that students and teachers can define behaviour in different ways, and that the issue of definition was a recurrent theme during the interactions. It is not always self-evident what is considered disruptive behaviour because it is related to (1) the notion of schoolwork and (2) normative claims.

### *Schoolwork*

In the school studied, different teaching methods were used. Sometimes teachers used a more formal, lecturing style, whereby the students face the teacher who controls all talk and activity. The students are expected to listen attentively and to speak only when asked questions. This style of teaching involves a fairly clear distinction between what is considered schoolwork and what is disruptive behaviour. The boundaries are relatively clear, and the teacher is in control and has the power to define.

However, the teachers clearly also valued a more child-centred education where students are engaged in individual work or on a task together. The teacher typically moves from table to table helping and commenting on the work and the classroom is full of activity and noise. This situation makes the distinction between work and disruptive behaviour more diffuse. Students can present their talking and acting as being part of the schoolwork they are supposed to do. There are many examples of students leaving their table and talking to each other during lessons. When teachers tell students to sit down or stop talking, references to schoolwork can offer an acceptable account. An example is an English language lesson in which students had to make an assignment and were encouraged to help each other when necessary. I was sitting in the back of the class and close to me were two girls. They were involved in things other than making the assignment and made quite some noise. The teacher had been looking at them several times and, after she mentioned their names, I recorded the following conversation.

*T:* Will you stop talking. You're disturbing everybody else.

*SI:* But Ms, we were talking about the assignment.

S2: Yes, she asked me whether we, where we should fill in them words for the second question if we should ...

T: Nonsense, you're talking again.

S1: What do you mean, I don't understand. How could you know what we were talking about?

T: Well that's clear enough, I can see you two at it the whole time. It's always the same with the two of you.

S1: Well I don't get it, Ms. We were just talking about the assignment. You told us to work together.

T: Yes, but not like *that*.

S1: Well honestly ...

T: Keep it quiet and don't be talking all the time, or I'll send one of you out.  
(*Extract 1*)

For a moment, the two girls seemingly carried on with the assignment but, shortly, they started talking again. The teacher had had enough and actually sent one of the girls out the class.

S2: Well I think that's *dumb*. All I'm doing is working and you send me out.

T: Working? Talking you mean.

S2: No working. It's really dumb.

T: That's as may be, I've had enough. (*Extract 1 continued*)

In these extracts, the definition of behaviour is at stake. Depending on the definition, specific kinds of arguments become available and particular interventions feasible. The teacher argues that the talking is disruptive and, in the end, this is an acceptable reason for her to act. The students, however, define their talking as being part of the schoolwork and thereby their behaviour as perfectly in line with what is expected of them. For them, the sending out of one of the girls is not acceptable but 'dumb' (*Extract 1*, line 13; in Dutch, '*stom*'). The question here is how the participants try to account for their interpretations.

In line 3 of *Extract 1*, the second student starts to refer to some details of the assignment. Such a description helps to make the claim that they are doing their schoolwork more solid. The details indicate that they are actually working on the assignment. They present the claim as something that is really true and independent of their own concerns (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Furthermore, the students make their claim factual by challenging the interpretation of the teacher (line 5). How can she know that they are talking about something else than the assignment? The teacher is presented as not knowledgeable because she has not overheard their talking and, as such, is unable to judge their behaviour. In addition, in lines 5 and 7 (*Extract 1*), the claim of talking about the assignment is introduced by indicating a lack of understanding or amazement at the teacher's indictment. The display of incomprehension or amazement works in the direction of making the teacher accountable for her assessment. The students argue that they do not understand the teacher because they are only doing their work. This utterance of incomprehension makes the teacher accountable and thus defines the teacher's interpretation as not valid. An incomprehensible assessment can be taken to reveal more about the teacher than about the students' behaviour.

The teacher deals with this interpretation by arguing that she actually saw what was

going on. So she depicts the talking as an objective perception that is independent of her interpretation. Furthermore, she uses extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) in arguing that the girls' talking was not incidental but continuous, and that she did not simply see them talking but 'very clearly' saw them talking. In addition, she deploys the notion of consistency by arguing that it is 'always the same with the two of you' (*Extract 1*, line 6). Also, in this line, she presents herself as entitled to judge because she knows them very well. These notions work towards defining the student's behaviour as typical, making it more difficult for the students to present their talking as exceptional. Furthermore, these formulations work against an interpretation in terms of the teacher's assessment.

During the research, I came across many examples where assignments led to discussions about appropriate behaviour. Another example is a mathematics lesson where the pupils had to use scissors to cut out different parts of mathematical figures and glue them on a piece of paper. However, not enough scissors and pritt sticks were available. Hence, the assignment provided an acceptable reason for leaving one's table, for turning around, and for asking for a pair of scissors and glue, preferably from someone at the other end of the classroom. Several times the teacher unsuccessfully tried to keep order and then, facing the class, argued that this was not at all like doing schoolwork.

*S1*: But Sir, you said we could work together and borrow things.

*S2*: Yeah, I don't get it. I've got to borrow a pair of scissors 'cos I ain't got it'.

*S3*: Yeah, and you've got to glue, too.

*T*: Oh sure, I didn't start teaching yesterday you know. I thought you lot could do this kind of thing, but no, what you are doing is very clearly not working together.

*S1*: But Sir ...

*T*: The whole point about maths is completely escaping you in this way. You are only thinking about scissors and glue. Make sure that you have your own pair of scissors and glue the next time, because you can't act normal.  
(*Extract 2*)

Here, again, we see the importance of how behaviour and situation is defined. The students define their behaviour as consistent with or within the limits of the assignment. There is again also the deployment of the notion of amazement at the teacher's interpretation (*Extract 2*, line 2). Furthermore, in this and the previous extract, the students describe their own behaviour in such a way (e.g. having to use scissors and glue, having to consult each other) that it appears as logical and ordinary. The terms chosen for their behaviour makes that behaviour adequate or as something that is difficult to find fault with. In doing so, the judgement of the teacher is questioned and made more problematic.

Thus, the teacher is faced with the problem that his interpretation is explicitly defined as incomprehensible. Hence, it is the teacher that is placed in a position of having to produce an acceptable account. He tries to do so by using extreme case formulations (e.g. 'very clearly') and by presenting himself as an experienced and knowledgeable teacher (*Extract 2*, line 4, 'I didn't start teaching yesterday you know'). Being an experienced teacher enables him to know what is really happening. Furthermore, he draws on the notion of disconfirmed expectations (line 4, 'I thought ..., but') to ground his judgement in reality (Wooffitt, 1992). A disconfirmed expectation counters the potential criticism

that the teacher is wrong or even biased. Initially, he thought that the class would be able to manage, but the facts proved otherwise. This utterance works in the direction of making his conclusion more factual because facts are counter to his original expectations.

### *Normative Claims*

Not only the definition of schoolwork, but also normative claims are involved in identifying disruptive behaviour. What is and is not considered appropriate within a situation is used to evaluate behaviour. However, there are also normative claims that are less clearly related to particular classroom situations. Claims about demeanour and showing the right attitude are more diffuse and more difficult for teachers to challenge directly (Werthman, 1963). Students sometimes display a stylised complex of body language (including an inactive or a 'leisure' posture, such as slouching, facing the other way, and sitting with their head resting on the table), inadequate reactions (such as repeating a question previously addressed or noticing something patently obvious written on the blackboard) and inattentive listening (indicated by eyes that carefully avert the teacher when he/she is talking). These and other forms of behaviour are difficult to miss for teachers but, for at least two reasons, they are also difficult to attack. First, the ambiguity of the behaviour makes different interpretations possible. This can trigger a debate or even an incident as to the correct interpretation. Second, issues about the limits of teacher's claims to authority are easily raised.

An example is a public argument in the classroom between a teacher and a student. In the many hours of class observation, I noticed that in some lessons this student communicated disinterest and was typically slouching a little in his chair. Most teachers seemed annoyed at this but, in general, did not say anything about his posture. However, on this occasion, the teacher reacted to the posture and an incident was triggered that ended by the student being sent out the classroom. The discussion recorded began as follows:

*T:* For once, sit up straight like a normal person.

*S:* What do you mean, normal? This is how I always sit, isn't it.

*T:* No that's not normal, it's no way to sit in class.

*S:* That's what you think.

*T:* No it isn't. Go on, sit up straight.

*S:* I sit ok.

*T:* No, you're not, you're slouching about.

*S:* This is how I always sit.

*T:* Go on.

*S:* Nothing wrong with how I sit. I'm allowed to sit how I want, aren't I.

*T:* No, you're not.

*S:* Well it's down to me, isn't it. What is this, a prison?

*T:* No, I just want you to sit in a normal way. (*Extract 3*)

In the last line of *Extract 2* and in the first lines of *Extract 3*, references to (ab)normality are made. The issue of what is normal is a fundamental moral one in social life and therefore often contested. It is closely related to issues of social control and bound up with the question of which actions should be treated as accountable and which ones



should not. Hence, questions of (ab)normality often have clear consequences, but answers are not self-evidently given. For example, labelling theory has argued that acts are not intrinsically (ab)normal (for example, Becker, 1963) and, in a classic paper, Smith (1978) has convincingly shown that abnormality has to be constructed in discourse. What counts as (ab)normal is not self-evident and the term 'normal' can mean different things. Hence, a definition of behaviour as (ab)normal can always be challenged or resisted.

In the extract, the teacher defines the student's behaviour as abnormal. The student questions this definition by interpreting normality in terms of regularity. He always sits like that. Thus, the student invokes the notion of consistency to account for his behaviour. He presents his behaviour as ordinary rather than exceptional. Moreover, in *Extract 3*, line 2, the little phrase 'isn't' (in Dutch, the word '*toch*') does some interesting work. It presents the teacher as knowledgeable of the fact that he is always sitting like this. This helps to move the issue into the direction of the teacher. The question then becomes why the teacher at that particular moment says something about his well-known, usual behaviour. In this way, the definition of abnormality is presented as saying more about the teacher than about the student's behaviour. Furthermore, in line 4, the student explicitly argues that the teacher's definition is a personal opinion and not a fact.

In lines 10–12 of *Extract 3*, the argument changes from definitions and the issue of facticity to the limits of authority. In the research, I came across many examples of students questioning teachers' authority by referring to self-determination and their own responsibility. In education, there is the dilemma between individual freedom of action versus authoritative constraint (Edwards, 1988). Teachers in the school in question frequently stressed pupils' own responsibility for their schoolwork and classroom behaviour. Individual freedom is one of the core values of Western societies rooted in the liberal tradition. The concept of freedom implies, among other things, that each individual is entitled to self-determination and an area of non-interference (Berlin, 1969). Authoritative constraint is contrary to individual freedom, and formulating something as compulsory is defining it negatively within a discourse of self-determination. As in many other examples in our research, in lines 10–12 of *Extract 3*, the student uses the concept of self-determination to challenge the order of the teacher. In doing so, he even uses the notion of 'prison'. Again, it is the teacher who is made accountable and faced with the problem of maintaining authority in the classroom in a non-authoritarian manner.

In the research, interestingly, I did not come across examples of students drawing on the notion of self-determination in formal and disciplinary encounters. If a student is sent out of the class, he has to go to the tutor or co-ordinator who, together with the teacher, will decide on punishment. In these meetings, demeanour is often made an issue and, because these meetings are defined as formal and disciplinary, the pupil's demeanour is easier to attack (Werthman, 1963).

## Professional Identity

In the research, students listed well-known characteristics for describing a good teacher (for example, Woods, 1990). Such a teacher should be able to teach pupils the necessary things and should be human, that is being really interested in students and their world so that he/she can talk and joke with students. Furthermore, teachers are expected to be fair and to be able to keep order. The activities of teaching and keeping order, as well as the need to be fair and human, are treated by the students as bound to the role of teacher or as defining characteristics of this professional identity. These activities provide

a common-sense understanding of what a teacher is and should do. This understanding not only structures interactions, but also offers scope for accusations and arguments about responsibilities. In their talk, students can use these understandings to account for their own behaviour and in making teachers accountable. Here I am interested in how exactly students manage questions of accountability or the discursive details used.

### *Keeping Order*

Keeping order was considered the teachers' responsibility by the students, who defined it as part of their job. Failing to do so provoked disorder and conflicts, as is indicated in the next extract. It is taken from a discussion between four students and their tutor about the problems their class had with a particular teacher.

*S1*: It's just a mess during those lessons. We all do whatever we fancy. That teacher's a dead loss, he can't keep order. He just sends everybody out and that won't work at all.

*T*: Can't you lot make sure there's order then?

*S2*: No, if we don't have to, we won't. It's the teachers' job. We don't have to do that.

*T*: Yeah ok, but there is something you can do, too. (*Extract 4*)

Here, the lack of order is defined explicitly as the teacher's responsibility (line 3). The disruptive behaviour is not denied but excused by blaming the teacher. The interesting thing is that the behaviour of the teacher is identified as deviating from category-predicated rules and norms. Sacks (1992) suggested that, in talking, people often draw on 'membership categorisation devices'. He argues that people construe others and their activities by identifying categories or social types. Bound to each category are activities that are proper and expected of persons who are members of that category. The students in *Extract 4* use a category contrast between teacher and students to explain the disruptive behaviour and to attribute responsibility. They draw on generally available descriptions of practices and features associated with these social roles. Teachers should keep order and if they cannot do so they are 'a dead loss' (line 1; in Dutch, '*niks*') and responsible for any disorder. The tutor seems to accept this interpretation (line 4, 'Yeah, ok'). Another example is *Extract 5*.

*C*: So why were you sent out of class then?

*S*: Dunno, I dunno, he just can't keep order. He's not got any authority. Nobody listen to anything he says, I dunno. They just laugh at him. You can do whatever you want.

*C*: But not anymore.

*S*: He is getting stricter, a bit unreasonable if you ask me. He'll just send people out without warning. If he'd say, one more time and you're out, but no, he'll just send people out left, right and centre. (*Extract 5*)

In line 1, the conversational device of adjacency pairing does the interactional work. The utterance of the co-ordinator functions as the first part of a question-answer sequence. In agreement with adjacency pair operation, the co-ordinator pauses after posing the question and the student produces an answer as the second pair part (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).

In response to the question of the co-ordinator, the student's account in line 2 of

*Extract 5* deals with the teacher's inability to keep order. It is the teacher who is to blame and, with her description, the student seems to orient herself to an interpretation that makes herself responsible. There are two other discursive features that work in this direction.

First, accounts of consensus may be used to underpin (or undermine) the facticity of a description. In line 2, the behaviour of the teacher is presented as something that has been noted by all students. 'Nobody' listens to the teacher and 'everybody' laughs at him. Arguing that different students have the same experiences and behave in a similar way suggests consensus and establishes objectivity. Being sent out of class is presented as part of a general pattern related to the teacher's lack of professionalism. This use of 'consensus' helps the student to present herself as 'normal' and as not responsible.

Second, I want to draw attention to the 'I dunno's' that appear in line 2 of *Extract 5*. In the research, I came across many examples where pupils argue that they do not know why they have been sent out of class (e.g. *Extract 6*, lines 4 and 8; *Extract 8*, line 2). Students typically start their account with this display of uncertainty. They do not know, have no idea, or simply do not understand why they were sent out of class. Punishment is at stake in meetings with a tutor or co-ordinator. Hence, it is in the students' interest to stave off the possible interpretation that the disruptive behaviour is their own fault. In these meetings, the issue of motive and responsibility is acute and consequential. The 'I dunno's' help to present the student as unsure about the actual reason for sending him/her out of the class. This expression of uncertainty works against the idea that the 'disruptive' behaviour is obvious and intentional (Potter, 1997).

Another example comes from a history lesson. In this lesson, the students were handed back their written assignments from the previous lesson. There was a lot of noise because students discussed their marks. The teacher was unable to get the class to calm down and he started threatening to send students out of the class. After several threats, one student was sent out and later had to report to the co-ordinator, where the following conversation was recorded.

C: Right, what's with you then?

S: I got sent out, sir, history lesson, master erm ...

C: And why?

S: Really dunno. Well, I was talking, but so where tons of people.

C: Well, tons of people. That can't be right.

S: Yeah, the whole class was talking, I mean erm ...

C: And why would he send you out then?

S: Dunno, Sir, I really don't know.

C: Did he gave you a warning?

S: No.

C: He didn't. Sort of warned everybody in general, but not you specifically?

S: That's right. (*Extract 6*)

Again, there is the deployment of consensus and corroboration as well as extreme case formulations. In line 4, the student argues that she was talking 'but together with tons of others' and, in line 6, she specifies this to the whole class. Thus, she presents her own talking as nothing out of the ordinary. It is in agreement with the behaviour of the other

students and thus is not exceptional or specific to her. In this way, the teacher's behaviour is made problematic and accountable. The discursive effectiveness of all this is shown in the reaction of the co-ordinator (*Extract 6*, line 7) who then focuses on why the teacher has sent her out of the class and not on why the pupil was talking. In lines 4 and 8, there is again the display of uncertainty, which is stressed by arguing that she 'really' does not know.

### *Being Fair*

There is another feature in *Extract 6* that should be looked at, as I found it many times in the research. In line 9, the co-ordinator asks whether the teacher had given a warning. This question was often asked in cases of 'disruptive' behaviour that led to class dismissal. Punishment was typically more severe when a warning had been given. Hence, there is clearly something at stake here for the student and she denies that a warning was given to her or to the class as a whole. This denial helps to manage issues of stake and tends to make the teacher accountable. The fact that no warning was given raises questions about the teacher's motives and suggest arbitrariness and unfairness. This can also be seen in the last three lines of *Extract 5*. Here, the student claims that the teacher was being unreasonable and arbitrary because, each time, different students are sent out of the class without warning. Because of this description of unpredictability and inconsistency, the behaviour of the teacher appears relatively independent from reality or even the students themselves, and draws attention to the teacher's possible peculiarities.

Another example is the next excerpt, which is taken from the same meeting as *Extract 6*, after the history teacher came in.

T: So what should we do?

S: Well, Sir I ...

T: You tell me, I've asked you about twenty times if you could be quiet.

S: But Sir, everybody was talking, so ...

T: So they were, but I clamped down on you. I ask you a hundred times if you will behave normally in class.

S: But you, you never warned me.

T: Oh sure, I've got nothing better to do. Nobody tells me I should be handing out warnings first. If I ask you to be quiet.

S: But you didn't, you'd just been handing out the questions to the test.

T: That's beside the point, you're always talking, every single lesson.

S: I think it is dumb. (*Extract 7*)

Again we see the student trying to undercut the teacher's interpretation by using the notions of consensus ('everybody was talking, so ...'; line 4), and unpredictability (line 6). Furthermore, the teacher's behaviour is defined as unfair and 'dumb'. To resist this undercutting, the teacher uses extreme case formulations ('twenty times' and 'a hundred times'), makes references to 'normality' (line 5), and defines talking during lessons as this student's usual behaviour (line 9). Thus, whereas the student's utterances can be seen as working in the direction of diminishing her own responsibility and making the teacher accountable, the teacher tries to present his behaviour as adequate and objective.

*Teaching and Learning*

According to the students, it is the teacher's job to teach them the necessary things so that they will get a degree. Most students said that they wanted to learn but learning depended very much on the teacher's behaviour. A teacher should stimulate and motivate students and be able to explain subjects clearly. This definition of proper teaching offers opportunities for explaining disruptive behaviour and making teachers accountable.

The following extract is one of many examples. It is from a meeting with a co-ordinator and two students who had been sent out of the class.

C: Why were you sent out at Ms A's?

S1: Dunno Sir.

C: What do you mean, 'dunno Sir'. Surely there was a reason?

S1: Well, you know it was her. She doesn't teach us anything.

S2: Yeah, it's so boring. We've been doing the same things for months now.

C: So does that entitle you to mess about?

S1: But Sir, everybody is bored, it makes sense you start talking or doing something else.

S2: Yeah, she can't teach, she can't. If she explains something, none of us gets it. And if you ask something she says you should have paid attention.

S1: Take Mr B, our geography teacher, he's ace at teaching. Nobody's messing about in his lessons.

S2: Yeah, and so's Ms C. But Ms A, she's no good at explaining things. She just says, do this and that's all. She doesn't explain or nothing. (*Extract 8*)

Here the students account for their disruptive behaviour by questioning the teaching skills of the teacher. The disruptive behaviour is presented as a logical and more or less inevitable consequence of the 'bad' teaching (line 7). It is the teacher who is made responsible instead of the students themselves. Their behaviour is defined as understandable.

The claim about the teacher's inability to teach is made factual or reality-based in two ways. First, in the last two lines of *Extract 8*, the students use a category contrast (Smith, 1978; Hester, 1998) to give an acceptable account. In contrast to 'bad' teacher A, examples of ace teachers are given. As such, the teaching of teacher A is presented as exceptional and unprofessional. The examples of 'good' teachers offer a readily available standard for comparison and for evaluating the teaching of teacher A. The contrast makes the disruptive behaviour the teacher's responsibility, because with a 'good' teacher nobody 'is messing about' (line 9). It can also be noted that, in their talk, the students present themselves as interested and responsible pupils who want to understand and learn (line 4), and who ask questions (line 8).

Second, classmates are presented as corroborative and independent witnesses. The fact that the two students do not understand something is not due to them because 'none of (them) gets it' (*Extract 8*, line 8). Moreover, with a 'good' teacher there is no disruptive behaviour. So the description is made factual by presenting others as having the same problem. This account of consensus underpins the factuality of the description.

## Discussion

The majority of students do not actively resist school but try to cope with its daily pressures (Woods, 1990). Students work out solutions to social and educational problems. They sometimes reject the day-to-day business of schooling by showing disruptive behaviour and challenging teachers' authority. This may be done by means of explicit and obvious forms of recalcitrance, but also with finely-tuned discursive devices, as examined in the present study. In general, students show disruptive behaviour in such a way that a legitimate account can be offered when challenged. Teachers typically define disruptive behaviour as problematic and it often leads to correction and punishment. Furthermore, as I have shown elsewhere (Verkuyten, 2000), defining a student as disruptive offers an explanation for poor educational outcomes and unsatisfactory school marks, and has actual consequences for remedial interventions. Moreover, Hester (1998) shows that such a definition can act as a reason for referral and as grounds for educational psychological intervention. Hence, students showing disruptive behaviour face the problem of having to give an acceptable account. It is in their interest to present their claims as factual and clear, and to undermine alternative interpretations that are detrimental to them.

The present paper has tried to show how exactly students manage issues of responsibility and interest. The focus was on the conversational details or discursive devices used in trying to make teachers accountable for students' disruptive behaviour. To both express their views and persuade others, both students and teachers have to take into account the possibility that their interpretation is rejected or undermined. An interpretation can always be presented as saying more about the concerns and pre-occupations of the speaker than about the actual behaviour. The data of the research show that students, but also teachers, oriented themselves to the task of convincing others of their reasonableness and realism.

First, it was shown that the students were sensitive to the fact that interpretations and corrections are dependent on how behaviour is categorised. Different labels have different implications, making the definition of the behaviour a central issue of debate. In their accounts, the students challenged the teachers' interpretations of disruptive behaviour by formulating the nature of the behaviour in relation to the nature of schoolwork and to claims about normality. Behaviour that is labelled 'disruptive' by the teacher can be presented as adequate and appropriate or as part of schoolwork. And claims about abnormal behaviour can be undermined by defining the behaviour as ordinary and general.

Second, the students used teacher identity predicated rules and norms for explaining disruptive behaviour and attributing responsibility. Teachers are commonly expected to keep order, to be fair and to be able to teach effectively. These activities define their professional identity as they indicate what is proper and expected of teachers, and thereby offer possibilities for making teachers accountable for disruptive behaviour. Constructing teacher activities as not meeting the category-related rules and norms directs attention to the teacher and away from the student. For example, teachers should keep order and, if they fail to do so, they are responsible for any disruptive behaviour. Furthermore, claiming that no warnings were given before being sent out of class raises questions about a teacher's motives and suggests arbitrariness and unfairness. In addition, disruptive behaviour can be presented as a logical and inevitable consequence of a teacher's inability to teach. Hence, notions of teacher identity can be used to place a teacher in an accountable position.

Interpretations can be presented as saying more about the teacher and his/her evaluation than about the behaviour he/she is supposed to evaluate. The production of factual accounts, in particular, is a powerful device for managing issues of interest (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Throughout the data, the students tried to challenge the idea that the teacher's evaluation of their behaviour was an accurate assessment. This is not to say that the different resources were invoked to manage accountability *per se*. The analytic focus was not on intentions, but on possible consequences of language. Most of the constructions were not explicit, but rather implied and sustained through the use of discursive resources and devices, such as disconfirmed expectations, extreme case formulations, introducing corroborating witnesses, deploying the notion of consistency, giving detailed descriptions, making category contrasts, and displaying uncertainty and incomprehension. These implicit constructions have the advantage of being less obvious and therefore probably also less readily challenged. Some of the effectiveness of these constructions was shown in the reactions of co-ordinators and tutors.

The discursive features work in the direction of making teachers accountable. However, teachers also used similar devices for blaming students and giving an account for their own actions. These findings have some implications for our thinking about power relations in school and the empowerment of students. Language is a key factor in teaching, and in classroom interaction in general. Language is also a very effective and reliable tool for defining and regulating power relations and control, but also for challenging and undermining these. Power is articulated through discursive practices. However, these practices are not restricted to, for example, the particular language teachers use to limit the access of students to principles of control (Bernstein, 1977). The present study has tried to show that there are many subtle ways for students to challenge definitions and undermine practices. The discursive competence and sophistication of students together with educational ideologies about child-centred learning offer them various possibilities for justification of self and for criticism of teachers. The authority of the teacher is restricted and cannot self-evidently be maintained in an authoritarian manner. Democratic notions and modern teaching styles offer possibilities for students to question teachers' practices. For example, students can use the concept of personal freedom for claiming an area of non-interference or defining the limits of the authority of the teacher.

The present study raises some theoretical and methodological questions. Many discourse studies on educational issues are concerned with social critique (see Luke, 1995). In these studies, it is the analyst who decides what people are saying and, for example, how issues of power and control are managed. In contrast, an ethnomethodological or interaction-based approach privileges the participants' judgement and uses the criterion of people's own displayed understanding. In the present study, the focus was on the way students themselves accounted for and justified their behaviour. Hence, our study is more in line with the latter approach, but this raises the question of the possibility of critique.

For example, throughout the corpus of data on teacher-student interactions, categories related to gender, social class or ethnicity were rarely used for explaining disruptive behaviour. This may be due to the specific kind of interaction dealt with here. Discussing disruptive behaviour with students for disciplinary purposes differs from, for example, discussing this kind of behaviour among colleagues or sorting students into categories for educational purposes (Mehan, 1991). In the research, it was found that, when teachers discussed students among themselves, references to gender and ethnicity were sometimes made in explaining disruptive behaviour. However, in teacher-student interactions, references to these important social categories were rarely made. Hence, in focusing on

the definitions of the interactants themselves, the present analysis did not use these social categories for analysing the talk.

The more general question here is the extent to which that which is in the discourse can and should be clarified by referring to what is outside the text. In the literature, there is an ongoing debate about this question, but there is no simple answer (Auer & Di Lucio, 1992; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). The answer given depends on both principle considerations, such as one's theoretical stance on knowledge and the role of the researcher, and practical considerations, such as the possibility of collecting contextual data. However, existing discourse studies on education have most often favoured the analysts' orientation and interpretation. These studies heavily rely on analysts' own local and societal understanding, making their empirical claims open to the accusation that they rest on uncontrollable data and *a priori* assumptions. Moreover, there is the danger of implicitly following some of the dehumanising methods of more positivistic approaches. These methods have been criticised by discourse analysts but they themselves come close to them, when discourse analysts are the only ones that impose meanings on text and talk (Burman & Parker, 1993).

An advantage of a closer-to-the-action analysis when studying discourse in interaction is the possibility of recognising the agency of individuals. The present study shows the different ways in which students account for their behaviour and try to make teachers accountable. The students were actively constructing realities and positions, and arguing about responsibilities. This picture seems difficult to reconcile with a more structuralist view on ideology, whereby ultimately the world is seen as lacking the possibility of autonomous agents, and students are presented as passive recipients of existing ideas,

The recognition of agency may also hold a possibility for critique whereby not only students' but, in particular, teachers' own displayed understandings and arguments are used to stimulate some sort of reflexive criticism. Moreover, a critical edge can be found in the content of what is being said or the way that wider ideological themes with their specific histories—such as those related to the concept of freedom and issues of authority—appear and function in talk about educational issues (Edwards, 1988). In a more conversational analytical approach, context is predominantly understood to be neutral. Aspects of context are examined in terms of frames, scripts, perspectives or some other analytical tool used for 'entextualization' (Silverstein & Urban, 1996). However, context can also be seen as a 'set of cultural rules, conditions and practices that govern how people talk' (Lindstrom, 1992, p. 102). Talk can be situated within the speaker's cultural horizon, and examined in terms of existing cultural discourses, repertoires or genres that are used as building blocks for constructing specific representations and justifying claims. In this way, utterances can be linked to educational and more general ideological notions.

In conclusion, the present study has tried to show that students make teachers accountable for their own disruptive behaviour. This adds to the many factors and processes known to affect teacher–student interactions and classroom negotiations. It was shown how, in situated interaction, this accounting was actually done. In focusing on the interactive details, it was possible to examine in detail how the use of various discursive devices and resources are combined to build a factual account that emphasises the teacher's role in students' disruptive behaviour.

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